Writing in Plain Language on the TRICARE Web Site

Communications and Customer Service

Web and Creative Services

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What is Plain Language?

- The simplest, most straightforward way of expressing an idea
- Clear, straightforward expression, using only as many words as are necessary
- Avoids obscurity, inflated vocabulary and convoluted sentence construction
- Writers of plain language let their audience concentrate on the message instead of being distracted by complicated language; they make sure that their audience understands the message easily

Why Plain Language?

- People should understand what we write the first time they read it, especially materials that tell people how to obtain benefits or comply with requirements

Benefits

- Plain language gets your message across in the shortest time possible
- More people are able to understand your message
- Less chance that your document will be misunderstood, so you spend less time explaining it to people
- Readers are more likely to understand instructions and follow them correctly

History of Plain Language in the U.S. Government

- Before the 1970s: Federal employees advocated plain language in government documents
- 1970s: Executive Orders intended to make government regulations "cost-effective and easy-to-understand"
- 1980s: Limited progress; Executive Orders rescinded

History of Plain Language in the U.S. Government

- 1990s: President Bill Clinton issued a memorandum to the heads of executive departments and agencies
  - "The Federal Government's writing must be in plain language."
  - "By October 1, 1998, use plain language in all new documents, other than regulations, that explain how to obtain a benefit or service or how to comply with a requirement you administer or enforce. For example, these documents may include letters, forms, notices, and instructions. By January 1, 2002, all such documents created prior to October 1, 1998 must also be in plain language."

History of Plain Language in the U.S. Government

- Plain Language Action and Information Network (PLAIN)
  - Created in 1995
  - A group of federal employees that began meeting to try to spread the use of plain language
  - Created the www.plainlanguage.gov to help others learn about and use plain language
  - Remains at the center of the movement in the United States

Plain Language on the Web

- REMEMBER:
  - People skim and scan; they don't want to read much; they want to find the information they need quickly and read only the answers to their immediate questions
  - Break documents into separate topics
  - Use even shorter paragraphs than on paper
  - Use even more lists than on paper
  - Use even more headings with less under each heading
  - Keep the information on each page to no more than two levels; the Web has little room for indenting or showing levels of headings
  - Questions often make great headings because users come to the Web with questions in mind

Plain Language "Rules" Summarized

- Write for the average reader
- Organize to serve the reader's needs
- Use useful headings
- Use "you" and other pronouns to speak to the reader
- Use active voice
- Use short sections and sentences
- Use the simplest tense possible
- Use base words, not nominalizations (hidden verbs)
- Omit excess words
- Use concrete familiar words
- Use "must" to express requirements; avoid the ambiguous word "shall"
- Place words carefully
- Use lists and tables to simplify complex material

1. Write for the Average Reader

- Know the expertise and interest of your average reader, and write to that person
- Don't write to the experts, the lawyers, or your management, unless they are your intended audience
- Use common, everyday words

What are “Common, Everyday Words”?

- Words and phrases your average reader is familiar with and likely to prefer over legalistic or bureaucratic terms

Compare this:

When the process of freeing a vehicle that has been stuck results in ruts or holes, the operator will fill the rut or hole created by such activity before removing the vehicle from the immediate area.

To this:

If you make a hole while freeing a stuck vehicle, you must fill the hole before you drive away.

2. Organize to Serve the Reader's Needs

- Explain how you've organized the document and how to use it
- Use descriptive headings to help your reader find specific information more easily
- Summarize complicated topics before you describe all the details
- Place items of most interest to your reader at the beginning
- Start by answering general questions and move on to specific questions later
- Describe a process in chronological order
- Include only information your reader really needs

3. Use Useful Headings

- Headings help the reader find their way through your material
- Headings should capture the essence of all the material under the heading--if they don't, you need more headings!
- You should have one or more headings on each page

4. Use “You” and Other Pronouns to Speak to the Reader

- Using pronouns pulls the reader into the document and makes it more meaningful to him
- Use "you" for the reader ("I" when writing question headings from the reader's viewpoint) and "we" for your agency

5. Use Active Voice

- Using active voice clarifies who is doing what; passive obscures it
- Active voice is generally shorter, as well as clearer; changing our writing to prefer active voice is the single most powerful change we can make in government writing
- Active sentences are structured with the actor first (as the subject), then the verb, then the object of the action

Passive	Active
The lake was polluted by the company.	The company polluted the lake.
The following information must be included in the application for it be considered complete.	You must include the following information in your complete application.

6. Use Short Sections and Sentences

- Using short sentences, paragraphs and sections helps your reader get through your material—readers get lost in long dense text with few headings
- Chunking your material also inserts white space, opening your document visually and making it more appealing

Length of Sentences

- Sentences should average 15–20 words, and never be longer than 40 words; cut out unnecessary words

  Compare this:

  The Secretary of the Interior may, in specific cases or in specific geographic areas, adopt or make applicable to off-reservation Indian lands all or any part of such laws, ordinances, codes, resolutions, rules or other regulations of the State and political subdivisions in which the land is located as the Secretary shall determine to be in the best interest of the Indian owner or owners in achieving the highest and best use of such property.

  To this:

  We may apply State or local laws to off-reservation lands. We will do this only if it will help the Indian owners make the best use of their lands.

7. Use the Simplest Tense Possible

- The simplest verb tense is the clearest and strongest; use simple present whenever possible
  - Example: Say, "We issue a report every quarter," not "We will be issuing a report every quarter"

8. Use Base Verbs, Not Nominalizations (Hidden Verbs)

- Government writing is full of hidden verbs; they make our writing weak and longer than necessary
  - Example: Say "we manage the program" and "we analyze data" not "we are responsible for management of the program" or "we conduct an analysis of the data"

9. Omit Excess Words

- Eliminate excess words
- Challenge every word—do you need it?
- Pronouns, active voice, and base verbs help eliminate excess words
- So does eliminating unnecessary modifiers
  - For Example:
    - In "HUD and FAA issued a joint report" you don't need "joint"
    - In "this information is really critical" you don't need "really"

10. Use Concrete Familiar Words

- You don't impress people by using big words, you just confuse them
- Define (and limit!) abbreviations
- Avoid jargon, foreign terms, Latin terms, legal terms
- Avoid “noun sandwiches”—too many nouns clustered together.

Compare this:

Underground mine worker safety protection procedures development.

To this:

Developing procedures to protect the safety of workers in underground mines.

Simple Words and Phrases
The Dirty Dozen

Instead of	Try
Addressees	You
Assist, assistance	Aid, help
Commence	Begin, start
Implement	Carry out, start
In accordance with	By, following, per, under
In order that	For, so
In the amount of	For
In the event of	If
It is	(Omit)
Promulgate	Issue, publish
This activity, command	Us, we
Utilize, utilization	Use

See more simple words and phrases at:
http://employees.faa.gov/worktools/correspondence_writing/writing_resources/simple_words/index.cfm

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11. Use “Must” to Express Requirements; Avoid the Ambiguous Word “Shall”

- Use "must" not "shall" to impose requirements—"Shall" is ambiguous, and rarely occurs in everyday conversation
- The legal community is moving to a strong preference for "must" as the clearest way to express a requirement or obligation

12. Place Words Carefully

- Placing words carefully within a sentence is as important as organizing your document effectively
- Keep subject, verb, and object close together; put exceptions at the end
- Place modifiers correctly
  - For Example: “We want only the best" not “We only want the best"

13. Use Lists and Tables to Simplify Complex Material

- Shorten and clarify complex material by using lists and tables
- List and tables give your document more white space, making it more appealing to the reader
- Use "if-then" tables if material is particularly complex and many conditional situations are involved

Starting a Plain Language Program

- Make it SMART
  - Specific
  - Measurable
  - Achievable
  - Realistic
  - Have a Timeframe

Agencies with Active Plain Language Programs in Place

- Federal Aviation Administration Federal Register
- Food and Drug Administration
- Health and Human Services
- National Institutes of Health
- Veterans Benefits Administration

Example—National Highway Traffic Safety Administration

Before

This is a multipurpose vehicle which will handle and maneuver differently from an ordinary passenger car, in driving conditions which may occur on streets and highways and off road. As with other vehicles of this type, if you make sharp turns or abrupt maneuvers, the vehicle may roll over or may go out of control and crash. You should read driving guidelines and instructions in the Owner's Manual, and WEAR YOUR SEAT BELTS AT ALL TIMES.

Example—National Highway Traffic Safety Administration

After

WARNING: HIGHER ROLLOVER RISK
Avoid Abrupt Maneuvers and Excessive Speed.
Always Buckle Up.
See Owner's Manual For Further Information.

Example—Health and Human Services

Before

Investigators at the contractor will review the facts in your case and decide the most appropriate course of action. The first step taken with most Medicare health care providers is to reeducate them about Medicare regulations and policies. If the practice continues, the contractor may conduct special audits of the providers medical records. Often, the contractor recovers overpayments to health care providers this way. If there is sufficient evidence to show that the provider is consistently violating Medicare policies, the contractor will document the violations and ask the Office of the Inspector General to prosecute the case. This can lead to expulsion from the Medicare program, civil monetary penalties, and imprisonment.

Example—Health and Human Services

After

We will take two steps to look at this matter:

We will find out if it was an error or fraud.

We will let you know the result.

Want to Know More?

- For more information on writing in plain language—resources, examples, etc.

www.plainlanguage.gov